

Against the Odds: NJCSO Takes on Giants at the Summa Cum Laude Festival 2024 | The Flying Inkpot

BY AILEEN TANG · JULY 22, 2024



The National Junior College String Orchestra recently won 3rd place at the 16th Summa Cum Laude International Youth Music Festival in Vienna. Their teacher-advisor Aileen Tang takes us behind the scenes.

It has been a good year for Singapore's young amateur musicians. Kids Philharmonic, for young musicians aged 6 to 17, was the first orchestra from Singapore to perform at the Berliner Philharmonie in June. And last month, the Voices of Singapore Children's Choir clinched 2nd place at the Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod in Wales.

More under the radar was the 27-member National Junior College String Orchestra's (NJCSO) participation in the [16th Summa Cum Laude \(SCL\) International Youth Music Festival](#) which took place 5-10 July 2024 in Vienna,

Austria, where they clinched 3rd place with Outstanding Success in the String Orchestra category – a feat amplified by the fact that they were not only the smallest ensemble out of 36 at the festival, but also one of the few that did not comprise the most promising young musicians from their respective country, include professional musicians or receive professional music training.

Underdogs from Day One

From day one, the NJCSO understood that they were the underdogs. NJC may be Singapore's pioneer Junior College and known for its academic excellence, but it is a "regular" post-secondary educational institution, not a specialised arts school like SOTA, or one commonly associated with music and orchestra.

Contrast this with other ensembles in the String Orchestra category. '[Many competing groups] such as the Hong Kong Youth Strings and Manila Symphony Junior Orchestra, are the existing string sections of national or regional youth orchestras, consisting of the best students accepted through rigorous audition processes,' explains NJCSO Music Director Han Oh, 50, who is also a faculty member of Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, 'They receive full state support for the best possible financial and instructional resources.'

Or consider the entrants from Taiwan, made up of music instrumental majors – not just students who take string instrumental lessons every week, but whose entire high school education is implemented as a music conservatory preparatory school. Says Han Oh, 'They have mandatory music classes such as major, orchestra, chamber music, and piano and are also required to perform for juries and recitals every semester. These are students who are trained to become future professional musicians.'

'In our case, most of our NJCSO students take string instrumental lessons as a hobby and chose to join our orchestra to experience ensemble playing. Some of our students had even only started learning when they came to attend the college, and others had even stopped lessons for a good while before joining the CCA,' says Han Oh. 'Furthermore, we only had minimal

resources to rehearse and prepare as government CCAs usually convene around once a week for training. As you can see, we were definitely the least equipped of all among the groups competing in our category.”

Up against such stiff competition, the ‘Stringers’ as they are affectionately termed, had an uphill struggle to overcome their disadvantages. The NJCSO team at SCL included three Secondary 4 students – a violinist, a cellist and a double bassist – who only started learning their string instrument when they entered the College in Secondary 1. They attended group lessons fully funded by the College and are allowed to use College-owned instruments for as long as they wish. In slightly more than 3 years, they have gone from holding a bow for the first time to playing repertoire such as Puccini’s *Crisantemi* (SCL’s String Orchestra set piece) and Tchaikovsky’s *Serenade for Strings* confidently and competitively.

One such relative beginner is 17-year-old cellist Serene Song, who picked up the cello from scratch at the end of 2020. ‘I learned and grew at a slow pace for about two years, before being pushed to my limits for two years, then competing internationally. I simply wanted to learn another instrument for free and meet like-minded people at first, but I now find myself taking cello seriously and striving to improve further. I still am not confident in my abilities especially when I think of the others in my orchestra, and I am still stressed about it and doubt myself a lot when I stagnate or struggle with even the simplest passages. But it has definitely been a wild journey in NJCSO and I have undeniably grown a lot from a couple of years ago, and I am proud of it. Perhaps I do have it in me for music after all.”

Serene spent her break times in school honing her technique and practised to the point of splitting her left pinky open, but continued playing through the pain and bleeding because, to her, there was never any question of not pushing through with it.

An unforgettable performance – and performance venue

Each ensemble is required to play a work by a local composer from their own country, contributing to the most delightful cultural exchanges in every SCL

category, and the rare chance to perform at the prestigious Golden Hall of the famed Musikverein in front of an international jury and audience only added to this experience. With no sound check, ensemble tune or warm-up, the experience can be overwhelming and is as much a test of musicians' mental strength as it is their musical ability.

Singapore's contribution was *3 Folk Songs* by Kelly Tang, encompassing "Rasa Sayang", "Bengawan Solo", and "Di Tanjung Katong", which played alongside cultural gems such as Estonian composer Veljo Tormis' *Tulesonad/Jaani hobu* and Tang Shih Chieh's *Tai-Ping Fantasy Overture* from Taiwan.

16-year-old Principal Cellist Aidan Yeong had a significant solo to play at the start of "Bengawan Solo" in the Kelly Tang work. "When I played my solo at the *Musikverein*, my eyes instantly lit up – it was much better than any hall in Singapore, especially with the 200-year-old cello Mr [Han] Oh lent me. I also felt immense pride in bringing a local folk song all the way to Vienna, spreading our culture and heritage to Europe. I could hear the beautiful sound resonating back at me as I finished each phrase, and I could hear the sound of my cello going all the way to the back of the *Musikverein* and back at me – truly wonderful!"

Music as a Global Root

For NJCSO, the anxiety of an international competition was almost overshadowed by the thrill of travelling to Vienna, widely regarded as one of the most important cities for classical String musicians. For some, this was their 1st trip beyond neighbouring ASEAN countries and the SCL Festival represented a pivotal point in their development as confident global citizens. Far from being sucked under by a "Us or Them" mentality, the young musicians relished the opportunity to enjoy performances by the other ensembles and make new friends.

Perhaps the most satisfying reward was the realisation of the Festival's motto this year: "Global roots of music and music as a global root". The NJCSO's young Singaporean musicians will remember the enthusiastic friendly waves

from
their



National Junior College String Orchestra with their conductor, Han Oh (in tuxedo). The author is pictured rightmost.

Filipino counterparts moments after applauding their rousing performance reminiscent of *Tinikling* (Filipino “stick” dance) rhythms, and look back fondly at the night of the Festival’s Closing Gala Party where they took numerous wefies and exchanged Instagram handles with their newfound friends from Hong Kong.

Says Principal Bassist Isabelle Lee, “My greatest takeaways from the trip were the friendships and memories made. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to travel across the world with such a big group of like-minded people and after the trip, I feel so much more connected and bonded to the CCA. Along the way, I learnt many skills, from technical skills to life skills such as independence. Being almost 10,000km away from home taught me to cherish my family more and never take them for granted”

Workshops with members of the jury

Besides the competition and community concerts organised by the SCL committee, ensembles also participated in workshops with members of the

jury, with the NJCSO playing under Sivan Albo Ben-Hur and Christoph Ehrenfellner for their 2 workshops.

It was during these sessions that Han Oh heard the highest praise and affirmation of the ensemble's musicianship: "Both conductors were truly surprised by our students' level of maturity in their playing. They reflected to me that although they could see that a good number of students were weak in their individual playing, they played in a completely different way when with the orchestra, citing expressive tone, sensitive reaction to nuances and tempo, as well as solid orchestra ensemble playing skills. They were truly surprised at the level of our playing and commented that some of our skills outdid the groups that placed ahead of us."

Han Oh sums it up by saying, "I have always emphasised to our students that they do not need to be professional musicians to deliver a professional performance, nor can professional musicians always guarantee a professional performance. In the end, it is [not about whether they have diploma level or professional training], but how the passion for the music is executed and delivered. Thus, I am extremely proud of the work and dedication our students have put in, and of course, all of the music that was delivered so beautifully and professionally at the festival in Vienna".